

ALCESTIS:

A Lyrical Play,

(As performed at the Theatre Royal, St James's, January 1855.)

ADAPTED FROM

THE GREEK OF EURIPIDES.

AND THE

FRENCH OF HYDROLYTE LUCAS.

BY

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APOLLO, banished from Olympus, took refuge in the household of ADMETUS, King of Pheræ, and served that monarch, in the capacity of a shepherd, for nine years; during which period the disguised deity became so warmly attached to the family of his protector, as to make them, on his recal to heaven, the objects of his continued care.

Finding that ADMETUS was stricken by a wasting disorder, APOLLO solicited the Fates in his behalf; and received for answer, that ADMETUS should not only recover, but should never die—so long as, on the fatal hour approaching, a substitute should be found.

No one else coming forward to rescue the fated king, his noble wife, ALCESTIS, daughter of PELIAS, king of Iolchos, generously volunteered to be the victim. In the version of the great Greek author, ADMETUS, though overwhelmed with sorrow, is induced to accept the noble sacrifice:—a weakness in some measure redeemed, by the generous and delicate hospitality with which he welcomes the apparently ill-timed visit of HERCULES, carefully concealing from his hero-guest every trace of the misfortune which has befallen his house and realm.

The result need not be anticipated. In the quaint language of the old Greek chorus:

“Many are the forms of the deeds of the gods; and many occurrences contrary to expectation do the deities bring about, while the things looked for come not to pass. So Providence hath contrived the issue of unlikely incidents. IN SUCH WISE HATH THIS AFFAIR TERMINATED.”

The fine fable of ALCESTIS, illustrating the virtues of piety, courage, and true hospitality, has been an especial favorite among foreign dramatists. A crowd of French writers have attempted it, with more or less success. RA-

CINQUE had nearly completed a tragedy on the subject, when some unexplained impulse urged him to destroy the manuscript. ALFIERI wrote another, "DANS LE DÉLIRE ET DANS LES LARMES." The genius of GLÜCK illustrated an indifferent libretto by CALZABIGI. So rarely is any portion of the music of this great master given to the public, that hostile or captious criticism can alone, I feel assured, take exception to the opportunity now afforded of reproducing but a few of his delicious strains in connexion with a subject to which they have heretofore been wedded, or be over scrupulous in noticing the difficulties attendant on such an attempt.

It has not been deemed necessary to adhere closely to the conventional classic arrangements. The fixed "scena," with its three entrances; the chorus, oscillating between pit and stage; the curtain lowered, not lifted, at the commencement of the play, &c., &c.; these details, though more acceptable to the classic eye, scarcely compensate for the varied inconveniences to which they give rise. Change of scene, moreover, was not unknown to the ancients, VITRUVIUS mentioning one person as a "scene-painter," and others as writers on scenography and perspective; though it is probable, that the enormous size of the ancient theatre confined these changes to the side scenes, "VERSURE"—(so called from being painted on triangular frames, each face of which presented a new scene); while, lastly, the fact of performances taking place by DAYLIGHT, contributed to render nugatory those artistic effects to which the modern stage is so deeply indebted.

Space will only permit me to acknowledge with brief, but earnest, thanks—the kind and zealous co-operation—not alone of the fair directress—but of *every one* connected with the present management of the St. James's Theatre.

H. S.

PERSONS.

ADMETUS, <i>King of Thessaly</i>	Mr. Barry Sullivan
PHERES, <i>his Father</i>	Mr. W. Cooper.
HERCULES	Mr. Stuart.
ADRASTUS	Mr. Herbert.
ORCUS	Mr. H. Rivers.
<i>Chamberlain</i>	Mr. Jones.
<i>Cupbearer</i>	Mr. Ennis.
<i>High Priest</i>	Mr. F. Ede.
ALCESTIS, <i>Wife of ADMETUS</i>	Miss Vandenhoff.
<i>The PYTHIA, Chief Priestess of Apollo.</i>	Miss Grey.
<i>The Children of ADMETUS.</i>	Miss Sanger and Miss Powell.
Thessalian Men, Women, Priests, Attendants, Soldiers, Musicians, Slaves, &c.	

Musical Director—Sir H. R. Bishop.

PRINCIPAL CHORUS.

Messrs. Galli.	Messrs. Lomax.	Messrs. Simmonds.
Frost.	Sharpe.	Muller.
Murray.	Fleetwood.	Sinclair.
Gledhill.	Raikes.	Pawsey.
Skilton.	Henrie.	Mathews.
Temple.	Smith.	Cooke.
Poussi.	Harris.	Mason.
Sapio.	Jones.	&c.
Mesdms. Goldsmith.	Mesdms. Pawsey.	Mesdms. Du Bois.
Allen.	Fleetwood.	Byers.
Sharpe.	Lomax.	Roki.
Frost.	Raikes.	Cipriani.
Adamson.	Redford.	Gossi.
Walker.	Brentnall.	Brown.
E. Walker.	Galli.	Garcia.
Wheeler.	Powell.	Lacy.

PROGRAMME OF THE SCENERY.

ACT I.

Entrance to the Palace of Admetus.
The Temple of Apollo and distant view of Pheræ.

ACT II.

Interior of the Palace.
The Apartment of Alcestis, leading to the Guest Chamber.

ACT III.

The Tombs of the ancient Kings without the walls of Pheræ.

ALCESTIS.

ACT I.

SCENE.

Exterior of the Palace of Admetus, L.—Approach to the Temple of Apollo, R.—Altar of Apollo a little back, R. C., in front of a statue of the god—In the background the City of Phœæ—Two priests, guardians, stand beside the altar, on which incense is burning—The chorus—Citizens of Phœæ—discovered kneeling, with offerings, laurel-wreaths, &c.—They rise as the symphony concludes.

Strophe 1.

Look! in the east afar,
Bright Phœbus' conquering car
The woven clouds hath riven!
Night, in her dusky veil,
Folding her treasures pale,
Hurries from earth and heaven!

Clouds of rich incense rise,
Odour and sacrifice
In the sacred temple burn.
Where the rapt priestess stands,
Apollo's high commands,
Solemn and sad, to learn.

[High priest and four others, bearing incense-boxes, vases, &c., enter from temple, R.]

Priests.

Antistrophe 1.

Water from cups of gold,
Marble, and floor, and mould,
Cleanse of all human stain!

ALCESTIS.

Let your keen arrows bring
Death to each hateful thing
Haunting this sacred fane.

Admetus! king! To thee
The Pythia's dread decree
Comes, charged with life or death.
Haste, then, invoke her aid!
Fate is not wholly swayed
By the gloomy powers beneath.

Aged Men.

Strophe 2.

With the dim eyes of age,
Dwelling on wisdom's page,
This have we found revealed:
That from the hour of birth,
Each helpless child of earth,
To fate's great law must yield.

Antistrophe 2.

Reckless of vow and prayer,
Weepings, and wild despair,
Bright youth, or tresses gray;
Dark and unbending still,
Fate, to thine iron will
The gods themselves give way.

*[Chorus of citizens exeunt—Priests surround
and decorate altar—Enter ADRASTUS from
palace L., meeting PHERES, who enters, R. U. E.]*

ADRA. L. Hail, my good lord! your royal son's restored.
Gracious Apollo with entreaties hath
Disarmed the rigour of the threatening fates,
And furious Death, baulked of his regal prey,
Stalks vainly round the palace. It remains
To win the favour of the powers beneath;
And through Apollo's priestess shall we know,
Within this hour, their answer.

PHE. Great Apollo
Is mindful of the happy refuge found
Within these walls, when Father Jove, incensed,
Drove him from out his heavenly seat, to bear
Seven years of earthly bondage. In the form
Of a poor shepherd swain, here would he lie,
Beneath some spreading oak, and breathe such strains
That all the vale grew peopled with strange forms:

Wild satyrs danced i' the glade; the crested snake,
His drowse dispelled, gleamed forth; the kine forgot
Their young; and at the minstrel's feet the fawn
And lion crouched together!

ADRA. For our land,
No less than good Admetus, this hath been
A fortunate exile.

PHE. That will yet be seen.
Admetus' service to the shepherd-god
Percance hath roused the Thunderer, and provoked
That ill so nearly fatal. Let us fear,
And not arraign, the immortal gods. Admetus—
Filled with a sweet and trustful piety—
Loved heav'n and all mankind. I taught him—I—
To fear the gods; and now, not he alone,
But his sweet queen, Alcestis, surely claims
Their pity—not their vengeance.

ADRA. Noble princess!
She reigns in all men's souls. [March within.

But see, my lord,
Here comes the royal pair!

[Enter from palace, L., ADMETUS and ALCESTIS—
Aged chamberlain, with the children—Courtiers, &c.

ADM. (joyfully). Welcome, my father!
You have learned the happy tidings. Phœbus' self,
Armed with his golden bow, hath been revealed
Guarding my perilled house 'gainst that dark power
Hated by gods and men. Youth, love, and joy,
Are but as baits to this fell monster's greed—
He loves to nip the bright and budding flower,
And with his chill breath wither up the soul
Exulting in its spring. No art would heal
The growing fever in these veins. Ere now,
All had been past—but Phœbus came—and lo!
I live again—again!

PHE. The just reward
Of your observant youth—and manhood marked
With ever-growing good. The gods protect thee,
And, royal daughter, thee! [Exit, attended, L.

ALC. (L. c.) Thrice happy day!
The husband to his wife—the son to sire,
Restored. But 'tis no marvel. Who beside
Hath, with such sacred justice—such pure zeal—
Wielded his high prerogative? In war,
The bravest—yet, in victory, first to save—
Offering, in peace and hospitality,
A daily incense to the favoring gods;

Patriot without ambition—firm ally—
Thou model for all kings! in saving *thee*,
Jove to mankind accords one general boon.

ADM. Soft, dear Alcestis! We have yet to learn
The oracle's decree. Till that be known,
My fate still trembles in the balance. Come!

ALL. Long live the good Admetus!

COURTIER. Every life
Were thine, my lord, if needed!

HIGH PRIEST. Sire, since dawn,
One stream of incense and rich sacrifice
Hath winged our prayers to heaven.

ADM. I know and thank
Your true devotion, friends.

[*Courtiers retire, L.; Priests, R.*]

ALC. O, my beloved!
My royal lord,—what transport 'tis to find,
In every heart, the image of that love
Which so fulfils my own!

[*Aside, while ADMETUS moves round, receiving
the congratulations of his court, &c.*]

Why, hideous dream,
Comes back thy memory now? Last night, I saw
Fell Orcus stealing tow'rd the chamber, where
Admetus lay in sleep! Breathless, I tracked
His bony footsteps, and beheld him grasp
The sleeper's long black tresses. Then I shrieked;
He turned, released his prey, and clutching *me*
In his white terrible arms, he bore me—Ah!—

HIGH PRIEST. The temple opens! Peace!

[*All kneel, as the gates of the temple are thrown
open, and the Pythia, followed by four priest-
esses, advances and stands upon the altar
steps; low music augmenting in sound to the
end of Pythia's reply.*]

ADM. (*with reverence*). O, sacred priestess!
The favoring deity, that guards my house,
Hath deigned, for me, to supplicate the Fates—
Say, have they yielded to his high desire?
Fearful ambassador! before thy feet
I kneel, and wait the sentence. Speak—I pray thee.

PYT. (*solemnly*). The Fates have granted great Apollo's boon,
And, for this once, relax their iron law.
But, in thy place, another soul must seek
Pluto's dark realm this day.

[*Exit, attended, into temple; music now
decreases progressively.*]

ALC. (*aside*).

Who will be first?

[*Courtiers, and all the train, stand as if terrified, or draw a little aloof from the king.*]

ADM. Life purchased with another's blood? No, no!

ALC. The gods but prove your constancy.

[*All gradually retire up.*]

Great Jove!

Can this be true? Friends, courtiers, servants, all—

[*All having withdrawn, music ceases.*]

Look not so grave, my lord, your noble land
Teems with devoted bosoms. This proclaimed,
Ten thousand loyal subjects will contest
The immortal honour of such sacrifice.

Ev'n now, methinks, I hear their eager shouts,
"Death for Admetus!" Fear not. All is well.

ADM. And, from that generous band, which innocent life
Should I, their father, choose? No, my Alcestis,
I know their duteous love, but nature strikes
Its roots instinctive in the hearts of men,
And chains them to existence.

ALC. Yet that treasure,

A thousand times before its natural end,
They peril in the game of bloody war,
Or launch it on some petty venture forth,
The sport of howling tempests.

ADM. Hope is strong—

And tells them they are lords of wave and war.
Who dreams of danger, when the white-plumed helm
Nods on his brow—when chariot, lance, and shield
Shed round him a wild glory—and the voice
Of trumpets chorus all? But when, at length,
Death strikes his quarry—I have seen the bravest
Weep, and bewail the fate that taught them war,
And gave, for that red field, the tranquil home
Where their youth dwelt.

ALC. There are world-weary souls
That pant for freedom, and await with joy
The hour that gives them death!

ADM. Life hath some balm

For every ill—sharp grief—or wasting care—
Fate—giving one life—makes that beautiful.
To breathe the free air of a happy land—
Watch the young morn blush in the orient sky—
Or sink, with richer crimson, where the west
Hath built her sea-pavilion—then—to hear
From brake, and forest, and dryad-haunted glade,
The spring's sweet-throated minstrels—taste the gifts
Of liberal Ceres—or the rosy stream

That Bacchus rules—but—more than all—to clasp
To the fond breast, our being's better part,
And that, surrounded with fair looks, wherein
We see our loves eternized—day by day,
Creep on to age, decay, and peaceful end—
O happy—happy fate!

ALC. (*aside*.) How he loves life!— . . .
Sure, in some dungeon where despairing guilt
Lies—forfeit to just laws—there may be found
A substitute?

ADM. No, my Alcestis, no.
This is the fatal sense of the-decree
Thou deem'st so full of mercy. One must die,
But *he* a free and willing sacrifice,
One upon whom the gloomy powers of Hell
Have yet acquired no claim.

ALC. Take comfort yet.
I'll seek some squalid haunts, and scattering gold—

ADM. My own Alcestis—life's a richer gift.
No ear will heed your prayer.

ALC. Then will I turn
Unto the gods immortal!—With choice flowers
I'll decorate their shrines, and sacrifice
Shall to their heavenly mansions waft my prayer!
Let man be merciless; the gods will hear.
They know our hearts, have seen our young love grow,
E'en from its first sweet impulse, to the wealth
Of its ripe present fulness. Never yet
Have we been separate. Will the gods dis sever
Their work, so sweetly joined?

ADM. Who knows their will?

ALC. You will not, shall not, perish!
[*Enter ADRASTUS attended, &c.*]

ADRA. Royal sir,
Great Hercules approaches.

ADM. (*hastily*). Friends—remember
The ancient, kindly rule, our fathers taught.
Hide—hide from Hercules that dread decree
That gives me to the Fates. Shut the mid doors,
And let no voice of weeping reach our friend
Who comes to us in joy. Look cheerful. Hail!
[*Enter HERCULES and attendants*]

Great son of Jove!

HER. Monarch of Thessaly,
Thanks for your princely welcome.

ADM. What good fortune
Brings you to Phœæ?

HER. A new task enjoined
By stern Eurystheus.

ADM. What is that?

HER. To seize
The mares of Thracian Diomed—hell-foaled,
And pampered with man's flesh My hand shall quell
That evil. But this lady, crowned and fair,
Is this Alcestis? No.

ADM. 'Tis she—my queen!

HER. (*admiringly.*) Fair child of Pelias, your beauty's fame
Falls short of the reality.

ALC. Alas!
A woman's beauty, but a transient film—
The gods be thanked for presents worthier far,
Love, gratitude, fidelity.

HER. Most true,
Lovely Alcestis. Beauty, lacking these,
A lamp that gilds some hideous sepulchre,
Only illustrates ruin. Your wise words
Recall my own Megara, fair and good,
That's distant now, in Argos. Kind Admetus,
My course is like the stormy seas of Crete;
But here's, for once, tranquillity.

ADM. Your valour
Is lent you for the good of all mankind,
And greatly you fulfil your destiny.
Praise to the Thunderer, that he has led
His great son hither! Let us to the board,
And there, sir, Bacchus willing, you shall taste
Cups worth the kissing! Welcome—welcome!

ALC. (*aside.*) Jove,
Send us a willing sacrifice!

[*March music.* ALCESTIS approaches different
groups, and gazes earnestly at them, while
ADMETUS presents HERCULES to the citizens, l.
All return to palace, entering about the end of
Strophe 1.

Chorus:

Glory to Alcides! Glory!
Ever, in the world's great story,
Shall the hero live!
To the prince, in power and pity,
Matchless—shall our grateful city
Fair asylum give.
Welcome looks alone revealing,
Every anguished thought concealing
With a mask of joy;

ALCESTIS.

All things round him fair as summer,
 Bring we to this hero-comer
 Mirth without alloy.

[Turning towards the temple.

God, that bear'st the golden quiver!
 From the sad and gloomy river
 Save our perilled king.
 This world's life hath no to-morrow,
 And to life, through joy and sorrow,
 We frail mortals cling.

[Act drop.]

ACT II.

SCENE.

Interior of the palace—Guest-chamber, c.—Entrance to the royal apartments, L.

Chorus (attendants).

Alcestis comes. Her servants bring
 Back each costly, various thing;
 Royal gifts, yet scorned, disdained,
 No prayer heard, no respite gained.

Single voice.

Better one ray of the orient sun,
 One breath of the bursting flower;
 One honey drop from the ripened fruit,
 Purpling the summer bower.
 Better these to the living soul,
 With hope on the coming way,
 Than robe and bracelet, than gem and gold,
 To the wretch that must die to-day.

Chorus.

Alcestis comes, &c.

[ALCESTIS enters, slaves follow, bearing treasures, garlands, robes, &c.]

ALC. My prayers derided, and my presents spurned,
 Both gods and men reject me. Leave the gifts—
 Begone. [Exeunt slaves.
 Buoyed up with fond, fallacious hopes,
 I have sought the haunts of squalid poverty,

Want, and disease, and famine, and not one
 Of all their gaunt and hope-abandoned crew
 Would, with his stricken life, ransom his king.
 Ungrateful people; are your shouts, your prayers,
 Your transports, and your triumphs, come to *this*?
 O, band of courtly flatterers! you that bent
 And kissed the dust before me, vowing all
 That, in my service, death were happiness;
 Do you turn traitors now? All fail me—all—
 The soldier that has daily walked with death,
 Familiar as his pillow—the grey sire
 That reckons life by minutes—the poor slave,
 A nod of mine could immolate—all fail.
 Who then shall save thee, dear Admetus? *Who?*
 Hast thou not yet one stay, one sure repose?
 Thy own Alcestis? Since the envious gods,
 Grown jealous of our bliss, demand some prey,
 'Tis *here*! [Enter Chamberlain.]

CHAM. Your children, royal lady.

ALC. (*starting*). Ah!—
 I cannot. Bring them—after—when thou wilt—
 I mean—not now (*aside*). If I once look on them,
 All's lost. O, courage! fail not now! Good friend,
 You love those little ones. Be faithful, kind,
 Oh, more than ever guard their growing years;
 Look, here are treasures, choose whate'er thou wilt,
 And if, in days gone by, I have seemed harsh,
 Impatient, proud, forgive me.

CHAM. (*amazed*). Madam!

ALC. (*agitated*). Friend—

A time must come—to *be*—

Aside] My brain grows wild—

I shall betray my secret. To the temple!

Friend—good old man—farewell.

[Exit.]

CHAM. Farewell! 'Tis strange!

Now, whither goes she? To the temple? Ah,

I see it. Noble woman! Faithful wife!

The king is saved, but, at what cost!

[Enter ADMETUS and ADRASTUS.]

ADM (*aside*). The hour

Draws on, and none come forward. Hope grows chill;

I'll nourish it no longer . . . Wake, my soul!

Let me remember that I am a king—

And more, a host, and friend. Adrastus, hark!

Take all my train—return to Hercules,

And give the feast new impulse. Send around

Cups brimmed with richest wines; let flute and voice

Blend in sweet unison, and beguile the hours

Till morn. To-night, at least, our guest shall smile,
To-morrow brings its bitter knowledge. Go!

[Exit ADRASTUS.]

Where is the queen?

CHAM. Sire—in the temple.

ADM. (*aside*). Vain

Thy prayers, sweet suppliant!

[Pauses, then resumes quickly.]

This is strange! New strength
Seems on the sudden breathed through all my frame,
Life, health, and youth, long lost companions steal
Through every vein and fibre! O Alcestis
Are thy prayers heard? or doth some great heart yield
Itself a victim for me?

CHAM. May the gods

Grant that!

ADM. To live—and, living, still to be
Near thee! O happiness! But who has wrought
This great deliverance for his king? A man
Of the people, thinks't thou? or of that high band
That closer gird our throne?

CHAM. (*aside*). Unhappy king!

The answer comes.

[Dirge-like music.]

CHAM. My lord,

The queen comes from the temple.

ADM. She seems faint!

Look, look, man! They support her!

CHAM. (*aside*). I must bring

Her orphans hither.

[Exit, L.]

ADM. Weak, and deadly pale!

Jove! can this be? O, love surpassing nature!
Her prayer rejected, she hath given her life—
Her priceless life—for mine! Wretch that I am.

[ALCESTIS enters, with languid steps, leaning on
her attendants, R. Cham. follows with children.]

My own Alcestis! O my love! my queen!

What have you done? Speak, speak!

ALC. Ah! sunshine bright!

Ah! heavenly eddies of the fleeting clouds!
Grass-bearing earth, and golden-roof'd abode,
And sweet Iolchos, where my bridal couch
Was spread—farewell, farewell!

ADM. Cheer thee, beloved!

Have the great gods no pity?

ALC. (*wildly*). See! oh see!

The gloomy river! What steals on? The boat
'Tis Charon, the grim ferryman! His hand

Waves high the impatient oar. He calls "*Away!*
Why dost thou stay me, shade?"

ADM. Woe, woe to me!

ALC. (*more wildly*). He drags me! Look! The winged Pluto,
 throned,

Glares from his dusky brows. What wilt thou? Off!
 Grasp me not thus!

(*More calmly*.) Admetus! Ah, my lord,
 I am going the dark road.

ADM. Alas!

ALC. Untwine

Thy loving grasp, dear husband. Lay me down
 Here, at thy feet. All strength hath left me now,
 Mine eyes are gathering darkness

[*Sinks down on couch, c*

Children! babes!

Where are ye? Ah, these little hands—Farewell.
 If I have earned a favour at thy hand,
 My royal lord, grant this. Let no new bond,
 When I am gone, have power to wean thy love
 From these our innocents. A boy's bold heart
 Asserts its own dominion, and, perforce,
 Makes of the sire a friend. The girl, more weak,
 Fond, yet retiring, needs a mother's aid
 To bid the leaves of the sweet human flower
 Expand and flourish. O my dearest lord!
 Never wed more, but to these babes be sire
 And mother too.

ADM. It shall be so—it shall!

Alive, I was the spouse of thy sole love—
 Dead, I am bound unto its memory.

Here in these babes, our mutual pledge, henceforth,
 My wounded joys centre. Now no more
 Shall feast or song revisit my sad halls;
 But by some cunning hand there shall be framed
 The image of my lost one. It shall lie
 Stretched on thy nuptial couch, and hallowed be
 With nightly tears, until I come to take
 The place held vacant in thy sepulchre;
 And never more be separate from thee—
 My only faithful one.

ALC. Children, you hear,

No second mother shall demand your duty.

ADM. Most truly will I keep my pledge.

ALC. Then take

These dear gifts from my hand.

[*Regarding them wistfully.*

Alas! I go

When I am needed most.

ADM. What shall we do—

Bereft of thee—Alcestis? Woe—ah—woe!

ALC. Time will assuage thy grief. The dead are nothing

ADM. Stay, my Alcestis—I will go with thee. [Music.

ALC. One is enough—a willing sacrifice.

Farewell, Admetus. Children, where are ye?

I can scarce raise these heavy lids, to gaze

Once more on your sweet faces. Take my hand—

I feel you not.

ADM. Speak once again!

ALC. (faintly). Farewell. [She dies.

[The chorus approach and surround the body of
ALCESTIS, over which is cast a funereal veil.

Chorus.

She is passed—the fairest
Flower of summer bloom—
Tears, of gifts the rarest,
Now must grace her tomb.

Single Voices.

Gracious princess! Bright Alcestis!
Fairest woman—truest wife;
Hide for ever, where thy rest is,
Nature's yearning, passion's strife.

Chorus.

Bring the lustral water,
Bid sweet incense rise;
Thessaly's fair daughter
On her death-couch lies.

Male Voice.

Poets, to her endless glory
Dedicate your noblest verse;
And embalm in deathless story,
This most glorious deed of hers.

Chorus.

She is passed, &c.

[As the chorus prepare to bear her off, loud and
joyous music is heard from the guest-room, c.

ADM. Hark! They are rising from the board!

Chorus (within, gaily).

To-day! To-day!
Shout! Be gay!
Wreath the cup!
Fill, fill up!
Love, wine, and song
To men belong!

ADM. (*hastily*).

My friends!

Our guest approaches, ignorant, as yet,
Of this our sad bereavement. Hide it still,
Restrain your tears, and hush the solemn hymn.
The hospitable laws of Thessaly
Ev'n breaking hearts observe. Conceal the body,
Remove these orphans. Go.

[*Cham. leads off children, L. The rest draw round the couch, L. C., so as to conceal it from HERCULES, who now enters, with others, holding cups, and crowned with garlands.*

Chorus (repeated).

To-day! To-day! &c.

HER. (*gaily*).

Celestial draught!

Immortal Bacchus, well hast thou deserved
The vows of us, poor mortals. Good, my lord,
Wherefore so grave? and whence these signs of grief?
Jove grant your royal children be not sick—
Not—dead!

ADM

No, no.

HER.

Your aged parent?

ADM.

No.

HER.

Your wife?

ADM. (*with an effort*). No, Hercules. Death has struck down
A stranger to my blood. We will remove
What once was woman, and return. Meanwhile,
Be merry, all.

[*ALCESTIS is borne off, ADMETUS follows*

HER. Well, death's inevitable.

Wine—slaves—more wine! sweet Lethe that drowns care
And leaves life's stream the purer. Wine, I say!
Now, what's the matter, man? (*To cup-bearer*).
Look'st thou so dismal
Before thy master's guests? Know this, my friend,
Death is a creditor that will be paid
No matter when he calls. All's dark before,
For fortune's issues are beyond the stretch
Of art or augury. Learn then from me,—
Drink—dance—be joyous—for to-day is thine,
To-morrow, fortune's.

CUP-BEARER. True, my lord—but here's
A grief unparalleled.

HER. (*surprised*). Grief!—For this stranger?

CUP-BEARER. Alas! my lord.

HER. Some slave?

CUP-BEARER. Would the great gods
It were!

HER. What mean you?

ADRA. (*entering, aside to cup-bearer*) Silence!

CUP-BEARER (*aside to Adrastus*). This man mocks us.
His wild intemperate mirth is insolence,
While the king mourns within.

HER. (*eagerly*) Tell me, at once,
Whom does your king, with so much pomp and grief,
Bear to the tomb?

ADRA. His hospitable care
Forbade us to inform you.

HER. Nay—

ADRA. My lord,
The queen, Alcestis.

HER. Ha!

ADRA. Too true. The Fates
Required Admetus' life—or, in his stead,
Some willing victim. When none else were found,
Noble Alcestis died.

HER. Most rare devotion!
What are my deeds to this? Admetus, too,
Listening with smiling cheek, and bursting heart,
To my unseasoned merriment! Good king,
And hospitable country, I may yet
Richly repay you both Away with thee!

Off, insolence of joy. [*Flings down the cup.*
Tell me, good friend, [*Tears off his garland*
What tomb shall hold your dead?

ADRA. The sepulchre
Of Phœæ's ancient kings. It lies without
The walls of the city, and at midnight, there,
With torch and hymn, we lay the noble princess
In hallowed earth beside them.

HER. Ha! The road
Hence to Larissa, skirts the spot you mean—
'Twas there dark Pluto, eager to enthrall
Some lingering victim, bade his gloomy realm,
Unfold its hideous labyrinths—and men,
Affrighted, circled with a mighty wall
The horrid precinct. There grim Orcus lurks
In darkness, and sometimes the traveller notes

With creeping veins, the inexorable shade
Watching his destined prey.

ADRA. 'Tis there, my lord.

HER. Enough, my friends—console the king. Farewell.

Chorus (within).

She is passed, &c.

[*Act drop.*]

ACT III.

SCENE.

Without the City—Night—In back-ground, R., a tomb—Cave of Death, L., surrounded by a half-ruined wall—The Funeral obsequies of ALCESTIS, by torch-light—Stage nearly dark—ALCESTIS, clothed in white, lies stretched on a bier placed upon a gilded couch—Near her ADMETUS kneeling—Chorus in groups around—Cup-bearers make libations—Music of Flutes.

Chorus (Women).

Sorrow—ah!—sorrow;

Pluto—gloomy king!

Men.

Never morrow

One so fair may bring.

All.

Rich in queenly beauty,

As in all love's duty,

Must thy truth

To this end

So commend

Thy fresh youth?

Let each soul

Pay thy dole,

Grief and ruth!

Sorrow, &c. &c.

ADM. (*rising*). Conclude the sacred rites. O men of Phœræ,

Thus, crowned with empty honors, do I bring

My queenly treasure to the dismal tomb;

Come and salute her, then, ere she set forth

On this her latest pilgrimage.

[*They approach.*]

How fair

Thou art—oh, sleeper! Death—that nothing heeds,

Hath laid no finger on thy loveliness,—

Thy lips, companions of the dewy rose,

Are moist and crimson, and thy velvet cheek

Wears on its smooth and rounded surface still.
 A holy smile of life. If to look thus
 Be death, the gloomy shade grows pitiful,
 And gilds the shrine he plunders—but—alas,
 Fate mocks us—'tis not so—Now, fair—to-morrow,
 A marble, senseless corpse—a little heap
 Of ashes, in a solitary urn!

*[After repeatedly embracing the body, he permits
 the attendants to bear it to the tomb—Chorus
 at back—ADMETUS moves irresolutely to and fro.]*

I cannot quit thee. All the sense of life—
 Its strength—deliciousness—and beauty—all
 Have left, to grace this gloomy house of thine—
 My glittering, desert palace. Why return
 Without thee?—To be drowned with orphans' tears—
 Tortured with memories of that happy eve
 When—crowned and fair—with torch and festal hymn,
 I led thee, darling, to my house and throne—
 Great Jove be thanked, I have not sworn to live,
 What better hour?—Alcestis!

*[Draws his poniard, and is about to stab himself,
 when ADRASTUS and attendants, who have been
 anxiously watching him, seize his hands.]*

ADRA.

O my lord,

What would you do?

ADM.

Rejoin her.

ADRA.

Sire, you owe

Your life to Thessaly. O, royal lord,
 Exert the courage that becomes a king
 Who rules devoted subjects.

ADM. (*bitterly*).

Which of them

Stepped forth to save me?

ADRA.

It was not their duty.

But, like a monarch, summon us to arms—
 Cast us, by millions, on the crimsoned field—
 And we will raise around you bloody walls
 Built of our mangled bosoms—every one
 House of a willing heart. . . . Time, my dear lord,
 Shall heal this wound.

ADM.

Nay, let me die.

ADRA.

When tears

And pious memories have embalmed the dead,
 We owe them nothing further.

ADM.

Nothing?—Go.

[Turns away.]

ADRA.

Permit us to remove this honored form
 To its allotted resting-place?

ADM.

Not yet,

No, no, not yet!

ADRA. Then quit this place of gloom,
Let not the coming dawn surprise your grief;
My lord, you are a father!

ADM. True—oh—true!
My children, mine and hers, I must embrace ye!
Farewell, Alcestis—(aside), yet, sweet spirit, stay,
Admetus shall rejoin thee, ere 't be day.

[Exit. C.—ADRASTUS and chorus return towards
the cavern.]

ADRA. The king is gone. Kneel, friends— [They kneel.
Pale—jealous power,
That haunt'st this dusky region, and wilt soon,
Wolf-like, with nostril spread, and glittering eye,
Rush on thy quarry!—Thou relentless shade,
Content thee with this costly sacrifice,—
Demand no meaner prey! He comes! He comes!
He waves his terrible sword! The fatal veil
Hangs on his shoulder!

[All crouch down in terror.—In a growing lurid
light, ORCUS appears, rising in the obscurity
of the cave; low music throughout the scene.]

ORC. Miserable souls!
Kneel, kneel—'tis fitting—you that scorn my name—
Shrink abject from my presence.

ADRA. Fearful shade,
Spare us! Be merciful!

ORC. Begone. To-day
I seek Admetus' wife—her only.
[Approaches the tomb, when HERCULES suddenly
appears on the threshold.]

HER. Hold!

Back—thou devourer!
ORC. (pausing). What art thou—so daring?
Apollo, my fierce enemy?

HER. A man!
ORC. (pointing to chorus). Why so are these—they kneel!

HER. A man, I say,
And one, the rumour of whose mighty deeds
Wrought in this upper world, hath pierced below,
And stirred thy gloomy kingdom. Through this arm
You have gained many subjects. Give me one.

ORC. What mean'st thou?

HER. I am come, in friendship's name,
For an unhappy monarch, to bespeak
Your pity.

ORC. Pity! What is that?

HER. For once

Relax your fatal law.

ORC.

My pity—mortal?

HER.

You are all-powerful, and can prevail
 With the dread Fates—your sisters. Bid them yield
 Alcestis to our tears. Bid Lachesis,
 From her immortal and white woof, renew
 Life's severed skein.

ORC.

Your prayers are lost. Begone!
 Delay me not. Day breaks. Back, Hercules!—
 Presumptuous mortal!—dost thou bar my way?
 Fly, while thou can'st!

HER.

Thou dark and fatal shade!
 Flight is for *thee*—not Hercules! *[Opposing him.]*

ORC.

Beware!

HER.

Restore Alcestis—seize her not—foul shade,
 Spare her. Thou shalt!

*[ORCUS forces him back into the tomb, entering
 with him; music louder.]*

ADRA.

Great Jupiter—now guard
 Thy hero son! *[Gazing into the tomb.]*

They struggle still. . . . He winds
 The god in his huge arms. The monster writhes
 In vain! One effort more! He yields—'tis o'er—
 'Tis won! Hark! hark!

ORC. *(within)*

Release me, Hercules!
 Alcestis shall return.

HER. *(within)*.

Swear by the Styx—
 That oath you dare not violate.

ORC. *(within)*.

I swear!

ADRA.

The vanquished shade returns! Fly—fly!
*[Chorus disperse in confusion—Re-enter ORCUS
 alone, deprived of his weapon and veil.]*

ORC.

Enough,
 Brave Hercules—My turn will come!
*[Retires into the cave—Re-enter from the tomb:
 HERCULES, bearing ALCESTIS.]*

HER.

Great Jove,
 I thank thee for this aid. Ne'er strove I yet
 So sore for victory! No—not when I quelled
 The Lernean scourge—an hundred foes in one—
 Nor when I strangled, in his own dark den,
 Nemæa's tawny terror. *[ALCESTIS revives a little.]*

She revives!
 Death keeps his pledge—so hardly gained—but yet,
 As partly subject to the infernal gods,
 A flickering and uncertain life is all
 This trembling form reclaims. Both sight and voice
 Are wanting yet. Here comes Admetus. Stay!
 He must not see her thus.

[Places her on the couch. Enter ADMETUS.]

I will postpone
His joy, to make it perfect. Gently—sc—
Admetus!

ADM. (*starting*). Hercules! You here?

HER. I came
To seek my royal host—my generous friend—
Admetus—you have wronged me. Was it just
To veil your cruel loss, and leave me thus
To waste in reckless wassailry the hours
You gave to weeping, till your very slaves—
This is not friendship, king.

ADM. Why should I add
To all my griefs, that noble Hercules
Should—sheltered in my palace—vainly seek
Refreshment and tranquillity?

HER. The grief
That bowed you to the earth—for a poor stranger?
A likely story, truly! Yet right well
May I, who now entreat as good a service,
Forgive the noble artifice. I have here
A lovely captive, whom my travel's course
Forbids me to lead farther. To be plain,
I have reckoned on your kindly aid to take
This charge, Admetus. When, by Heaven's good aid,
I shall have vanquished Thracian Diomede,
And made his steeds a prey, I will return,
And, with deep thanks, reclaim her. If I fall,
Let her be thine.

ADM. Ask aught but this. [*Walks apart.*]

HER. Could I
Seek Pluto's dreary realm, and thence redeem—
Another—thy Alcestis.

[*ALCESTIS, slowly reviving at the mention of her name, rises, and comes forward with feeble and uncertain steps, as one blind.*]

Ha! she comes!

ADM. (*absorbed in grief*). Pluto releases none.

HER. (*aside*). Her step is wandering.

[*Approaches ALCESTIS, who, without touching him, seems to follow his guidance. He draws the veil over her head.*]

I own your scruples just, but, for this woman,
Demand no duty that a spouse may claim.

ADM. Forgive me—I—I cannot.

HER. You may yet

Regret this hard refusal.

ADM. (*Turning suddenly*). Be it so.

You may conduct her to the palace.

HER. No.

I trust her to your hand alone.

ADM. You try

My friendship, Hercules!

HER. ~~Perhaps—but, now,~~

Accept this charge I offer.

ADM. I have said.

I do so, but, (I care no more to hide
My purpose), this accomplished, I return
To my Alcestis' side, and, with my sweet,
Renew our bonds eternally.

[ALCESTIS, who has gradually recovered the consciousness of existence, trembles at the mention of her name by ADMETUS, seeming to comprehend his speech, but unable to reply.]

HER. My friend,

Some ills, that seem intolerable, may
Grow light i' the grasping. Ere you strike the blow
You threaten—mark this stranger—then resolve
Whether to live or die!

ADM. (trembling). [Snatches off the veil from ALCESTIS]
Heavens and earth!

What prodigy is this? Alcestis!

HER. She!

ADM. No—'tis some form of air. A spell has raised it,
For credulous love's deception.

HER. Take her hand.

ADM. Alcestis! Is it thou, love?

ALC. It is I!

Mine ears drink in that sweet, familiar sound!
My pulses throb! my powers re-animate!
My spirit wakes! A growing, glorious ray
Visits mine eyes! I SEE! O, fairest dawn
That ever lit the world!

[Falls on her knees.]

Hail, lovely nature!
Dear Thessaly! Hail, welcome-whispering breeze!
Hail, health, and joy, and fragrance! O, Admetus,
Clasp me, again, thy wife, twice wedded. Death
Restores, and gives me thee!

ADM. My love—my wife!

What gracious power hath wrought this deed of mercy?

HER. I fought with the destroyer.

ADM. Thou! O man,

Greater than man!

[Re-enter ADRASTUS, PHERES, and Chorus.]

PER. Admetus! Oh, my son,

Why didst thou keep this from me? This old life
Had been the fitter ransom.

ADM Well, I knew
You would so deem it, father.

[Enter Chamberlain with children.

ALC. (meeting them). Come, my birds,
Under your mother's wing; rest, and be happy.
Alas! I find 'tis easier far to die
Than part with our beloved ones.

[Music. Enter the Pythia, R., bearing a crown
of laurels, the priestesses of APOLLO attending.

PYTH. (to HER.) Great Apollo,
The immortal watcher of Admetus' house,
Sends me to Hercules. The bright power hath seen
Your dangerous strife, and at his word, I come,
Brave man, to place on your victorious brows
This verdant cincture. You have conquered fate,
Therefore your name, linked with new deeds, shall pass,
From age to age, a word significant
Of loyalty, strength, courage, ay, and more,
Faith in the gods immortal. [Turning toward ALC

Let mankind
Learn from your bright example what high deeds
Find birth in love and brotherhood, and sweet
Acceptance with the gods. Customs may change,—
Enlightened wisdom bend in other shrines,—
All the great glories of this living world,
All that man's hands have wrought or minds conceived,
May fail, but virtue *never*. Arm you then,
With truth to choose the righteous cause,—with courage
To further it,—mercy to chasten power,—
And faith, that leaves your labour's glorious end
To the Supreme and wordrous Source of all.

[Music, exit

Chorus.

Glory to {Alcestis
Alcides}, glory,
Ever in Thessalian story
Shall the {hero
princess} live
To them both, in power and pity,
Matchless, let our grateful city,
Fair asylum give!

[Curtain

Priestesses.

Chorus.

Chorus.

PHERES.

HERC.

PYTHIA.

ADMETUS.

ALC.

CHILDREN.

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